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Mountain Cottontail Rabbit

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MOUNTAIN COTTONTAIL RABBIT

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Can you guess how the mountain cottontail got its name? Cottontail rabbits have a poof of white fur on the underside of their tails. It looks like a large cotton ball was glued to the tail. They do live in mountains, but they are also found in southern Idaho's deserts.

Mountain cottontail rabbits are grayish-brown in color on the top of their bodies and gray to white on the bottom. They are small, but they are not Idaho's smallest rabbit. Idaho's smallest rabbit is the pygmy rabbit. Pygmy rabbits are less than one foot long and weigh less than one pound! Mountain cottontails are thirteen to sixteen inches long and weigh between one and one-half pounds to two pounds. It can be difficult to judge how big an animal is in nature. To know if you are looking at a pygmy or cottontail rabbit, you need to look at the tail. Unlike their cousins the cottontail, pygmy rabbits don't have the white puffball of fur on the underside of their tails.

Mountain cottontails like to live in brushy, rocky areas. They like dense sagebrush, thick plants along a streamside or the brushy edges along a forest. Their gray coats are perfect for helping them camouflage in these habitats.

Mountain cottontails are crepuscular. That means they are most active in the late afternoon and early morning hours. When awake, they spend most of their time eating. Grasses, sagebrush

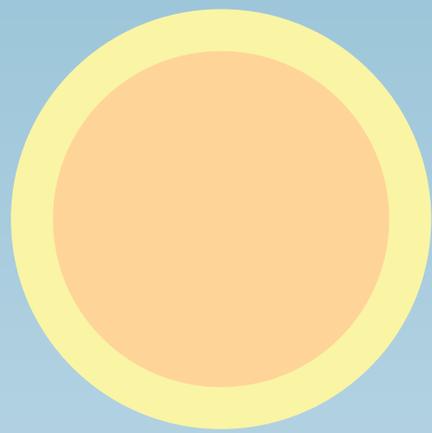
and juniper are all yummy foods for mountain cottontails.

While active, cottontails need to look out for danger. They are on the menu for many animals. Bobcats, snakes, coyotes and owls are just some of the animals that eat cottontail rabbits. Luckily, cottontails' large ears help them to hear pouncing predators. Their eyes also help them to see predators sneaking up on them.

Mountain cottontails seek shelter in a burrow. Burrows are also where they give birth. Mountain cottontails can have a lot of babies. Each time a female gives birth, she will have about five babies. She can have babies three to five times in one year. That means one rabbit can have 15 to 25 babies each year! That is a lot of mountain cottontails. Baby cottontails are born in a nest lined with grass and their mother's fur. The babies are blind and hairless when born, but they grow quickly drinking their mother's milk. In four to five weeks the babies are weaned, and they are independent. If they can avoid being eaten, they may have their own babies in less than a year.

Look for mountain cottontail rabbits while exploring Idaho's lands. You may have to look closely. Sometimes they are just a blur of fur seen out of the corner of the eye. They will quickly scamper and scurry away.





FOOD CHAINS AND WEBS

Have you ever heard the saying, “one thing leads to another?” This sure is true with food chains. Food chains are formed when one animal eats a plant and then another animal eats it. Each plant or animal is one link in the chain.

Living things need energy in order to survive. Plants get energy from the sun. Animals get energy by eating plants or other animals. Energy is passed along as animals eat. A food chain is the order of who eats whom to get the energy and nutrition needed to survive.

Some links are easy to see. Almost all food chains start with the sun. Plants, like sagebrush, use energy from the sun to make the sugar and food needed to grow. A cottontail eats the sagebrush and uses the energy stored in the leaf. A coyote then eats the cottontail, and the energy in the cottontail is passed to the coyote. Sun links to sagebrush, which links to cottontail, which links to coyote.

Other links may be more difficult to see. Do you think there could be a food chain in a mud puddle? Sure! Seeds blow into a puddle and grow into tiny plants. A mosquito lays eggs in the puddle that hatch into larvae. They eat the tiny plants. Sun links to plant which links to mosquito larvae; this is a food chain.

Sometimes things other than just energy and nutrients pass from one animal to the next.

Chemicals used to kill certain plants have been found in birds. How did the poison get into their bodies when they didn't eat the plants the poison was sprayed on? The answer can be found by following the food chain. Mice swallowed the poison when eating the plants. The poison does not leave the bodies of the mice. When the birds ate the mice, they also ate the poison that was in the mice.

Have you ever heard of a food web? Food webs are made up of food chains that are linked together. Food webs help show us how plants and animals are connected in nature. No matter how different and separate plants and animals may seem, their food chains connect them in some way. Would you think that a salamander would be connected to a wolf? It may be hard to see this connection, but it is there. Wolves eat moose, and moose eat cattails. Salamanders eat aquatic insects that eat cattails. Salamanders and wolves are connected in the food web by cattails. If the cattails around a pond are removed, both the wolves and salamanders might be affected.

Everything in nature is connected in some way. Food chains and webs help us see those connections. Cottontail rabbits are connections in many food chains and webs. Do you think you might be connected to cottontail rabbits? Think of different food chains and webs to see if you can find a connection.



CLEVER DEFENSES

Can you think of an animal that has a clever way of protecting itself? Animals may use color, armor, or even poison to protect themselves.

Cottontail rabbits use their speed and coloration. When cottontails notice danger, they quickly run and dart away. Usually they don't run very far. Cottontails often run for 30 to 50 feet, stop under a bit of cover and freeze. The color of their fur camouflages or hides them in their habitat. If they stay frozen, a predator might walk right past the still cottontail.



Turtles use armor. Turtle shells are made of bone, and the outside is covered with scales called scutes. Scutes are made of the same thing as your fingernails, something called keratin. Keratin is hard and tough and helps to protect the shell from weather. The patterns and colors on the scutes also help camouflage the turtle. If camouflage doesn't protect the turtle, it can seek protection inside its shell. Turtles' necks are very flexible, and the skin around the neck is loose. This allows the turtle to pull its whole neck inside the shell when danger is near. Most turtles fold their necks in an "S" shape inside the shell. It is very difficult for a predator to get a turtle out of its shell.



Some lizards also have armor. Horned lizards come to mind. They are covered by sharp, pointy scales. Horned lizards have another way to protect themselves. They can squirt blood out of the corner of their eyes! The blood may go as far as three feet. This definitely will startle a predator!

Poison is a good defense, too. Sometimes an animal might not look dangerous. Many frogs, toads and salamanders have glands on them that make poison. If they aren't poisonous, they may taste awful. Poisonous animals are sometimes bright and colorful. Their bright colors are a warning to stay away.



Think of a skunk. The stripes on a skunk are a warning to stay away, and boy, do they smell bad! Once an animal has had a run-in with a skunk, it most likely won't get too close to a skunk again. Can you think of other clever ways animals protect themselves? There are just about as many clever defenses as there are animals.

A CLUSTER OF CRITTERS

You may know that deer hang out in herds. A group of cottontail rabbits is called a colony or nest. But have you ever heard of a knot of toads or a murder of crows? How about a kettle of hawks? The English language has hundreds of names for groups or collections of critters.

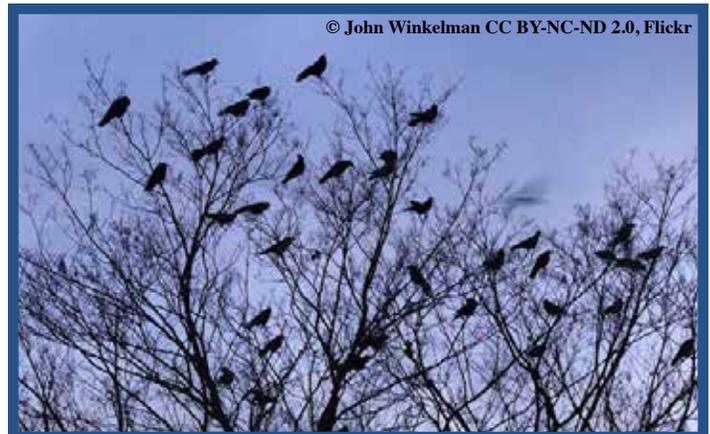
Many animal group names date back to the Middle Ages. Some names were hunting terms. Hunters would pursue a dray of squirrels or a spring of teal.

There are many reasons why someone may have first chosen a particular name. The sounds the animals make – a murmuration of starlings. The animals' homes – a nest of pheasants. What the gathering looks like – a knot of toads. A repetition of sounds the animal makes – a gaggle of geese.

Some names are mistakes. A school of fish was first called a shoal of fish. Fish gather in a shoal, a shallow place in a river or lake. A long time ago someone translated shoal of fish as school of fish, and the name stuck.

Here are some other animal group names. Can you think of more?

- ♦ Army of frogs
- ♦ Cete of badgers
- ♦ Covey of quail
- ♦ Cloud of gnats
- ♦ Gang of elk
- ♦ Hive of bees
- ♦ Leash of fox
- ♦ Tribe of goats
- ♦ Romp of otters
- ♦ Pack of wolves
- ♦ Charm of finches
- ♦ Descent of woodpeckers
- ♦ Hover of trout
- ♦ Raft of ducks





Let Them Be

Spring may seem like it is far away, but spring is right around the corner. Soon the snow will melt in the mountains and plants will green up. Spring is the perfect time to get out of the house and explore all the wonders of nature. Walks, bike rides and fishing trips may take us closer to wildlife. You may see baby animals. It's a true sign that spring has arrived.

When you hear people talking about enjoying animals, remember it is especially important that we leave animals alone. Let them do the things they need to do to survive. Getting too close to wild animals might stress them and cause them to die.

As humans, we have an urge to take care of things we think are helpless, especially "cute" animals, like the cottontail rabbits. If you see a baby animal, don't assume it has been abandoned by its mother. Most of the time, this isn't the case. Mothers often leave their young hidden while they go away to eat. If the mother stayed close to her baby, she could actually draw

the attention of a predator. You may have scared the mother away. She will return once "danger" has passed.

If you know that an animal is orphaned because the mother has died, call your local Fish and Game office. They will take the animal to a wildlife rehabilitator. Chances are if you take an animal home, it will die. Caring for a wild animal is not the same as caring for a pet. They need special foods, cages and treatments. Wildlife rehabilitators are specially trained and licensed to care for them.

Wildlife should not be handled, fed, chased or disturbed. If an animal will let you close enough to pick it up, it may be sick. Do not pick up a wild animal – dead or alive.

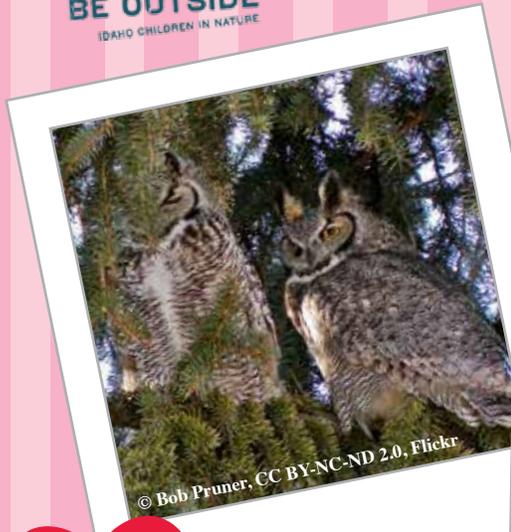
Wild animals are just that – wild! They survive on their own just fine without any help from people. Wild animals are unique and wonderful, view them from a distance and leave wildlife in the wild.





Looking for Animal

Valentines!



Are you giving anyone a special valentine this month? It's fun to make valentines to send to friends or give to family. With spring on the way, many animals will be giving "valentines" to each other, but their valentines are not made out of paper! When you are exploring outside this winter and spring, look for animals and the "valentines" they give to each other.

Great horned owls are some of the earliest nesting birds in North America. They nest in late January and February. This is the time when great horned owls show they are committed to each other. During mating season, male and female great horned owls hoot back and forth to each other. They also bow and rub bills.

Some animals will give food to each other. Barn owls offer their mates tasty mice as a gift. Before the female ever starts to lay her eggs, the male will bring her food. This may be his way of showing her that he is a good hunter. While the female barn owl sits on her eggs, the male will need to bring her food. He will also need to help bring food to the owlets.

Sometimes animals try to impress their cuties by their actions. This is how cottontail rabbits impress their mates. They jump over each other. They may also do something that is a bit gross; they often urinate when they jump, spraying their potential mate with pee! You may think that is yucky, but cottontails don't seem to mind.

Male shrews get a bit chubby to impress female shrews. Some male shrews double their weight before breeding season. Could you imagine eating so much food that you doubled your weight in just a few weeks or months? You would have to eat tons of food! Female shrews must like their special guys on the plump side.

Some animals offer their mates valentines of dancing and singing. Male crows can put on quite a display. They dance, bow and strut with their wings and tail feathers spread out. While dancing, crows sing a song that is a bit like a rattle. Animals may not give real valentines to their sweeties, but they offer other gifts to show they like each other. Be sure to look for these animal "valentines" outside this winter and spring.

Mountain Cottontail Puzzle

N N I G K H H Y W D I G S R V
 R Z Q B B S H A I R L E S S D
 I I Z M U U B G G T L S C R R
 O S O X N R G X I B D V S W F
 E T N P A B R Y D N H T I R Q
 D G J V E E P O X Q A T E B P
 B T A H L G U C W T Y E S F K
 A A S L I A T Q I S Z O X E W
 B E T V F S N B Z E S H M I N
 I K N F K U A Q K X L N Z R X
 E F E V O H O U X O X N Q P L
 S K X J P R F M K S V G U H A
 E C O D I I D W A B K C M Z R
 I Z H S W S H K V C X N I J U
 U G W Q K B O I C T H A T V K

- Words**
- BABIES
 - BURROWS
 - CAMOUFLAGE
 - EAT
 - FREEZE
 - HABITATS
 - HAIRLESS
 - NEST
 - SAGEBRUSH
 - TAILS

Cottontail rabbits were named for their _____.
 Brushy, rocky areas are perfect _____ for mountain cottontails.
 Cottontail rabbits gray coats help them _____.
 Grasses, _____ and juniper are all eaten by mountain cottontails.
 _____ offer cottontails shelter.
 Cottontail rabbits' have lots of _____.
 Baby cottontails are born blind and _____.
 Many animals _____ cottontail rabbits.
 If danger is near, cottontail rabbits will run and _____.
 A group of cottontail rabbits is called a colony or _____.

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Lead Writer: Adare Evans

Layout: Glenna Gomez

Contributors: Adare Evans, Vicky Runnoe



WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!
 If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express,
 it may be included in a future issue! Send it to:
adare.evans@idfg.idaho.gov
 or
 Wildlife Express, Idaho Fish and Game
 PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707